

Message Text

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PAGE 01 KUALA 00713 01 OF 02 021028Z

ACTION EA-09

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06

TRSE-00 OMB-01 EB-08 AID-05 SAJ-01 /070 W

-----021046Z 019242 /14

R 020313Z FEB 77

FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6097

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

AMEMBASSY MANILA

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 KUALA LUMPUR 0713

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PGOV, MY

SUBJECT: UMNO, NATIONAL FRONT POLITICS AND ELECTIONS; SOME NORTH
MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVES

A. KUALA LUMPUR 549, B. KUALA LUMPUR A-10, 1/25/77

1. SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION. EMBOFF HAS JUST RETURNED FROM 5 1/2 DAY VISIT TO NORTH MALAYSIAN STATES OF KELANTAN, KEDAH AND PERLIS WHERE HE MET A NUMBER OF JOURNALISTS, POLITICIANS AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND OBTAINED INSIGHTS INTO CURRENT STATE OF RIVALRIES WITH THE DOMINANT UMNO PARTY, AS WELL AS BETWEEN IT AND ITS LESSER PARTNERS IN THE RULING NATIONAL FRONT COALITION. THERE WAS ALSO A STRONG CONSENSUS AMONG A BROAD SPECTRUM OF OBSERVERS THAT THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD IN 1978. DOMINANT THEMES INCLUDED THE VIEW THAT THE UMNO "OLD GUARD" CONSERVATIVES HAVE LOST A LOT OF THEIR STREAM, ESPECIALLY SINCE THE DEATH OF OUTSPOKEN UMNO YOUTH LEADER JAAFAR ALBAR; THAT DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMED'S POSITION HAS STRENGTHENED OF LATE AND PROSPECTS HAVE DIMINISHED THAT HE WILL BE CHALLENGED

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PAGE 02 KUALA 00713 01 OF 02 021028Z

WHEN HE SEEKS ENDORSEMENT AS UMNO DEPUTY PRESIDENT IN 1978; THAT GHAZALI SHAFIE'S AMBITIONS FOR HIGHER OFFICE CONTINUE UNABATED AND CONSTITUTE A KEY ELEMENT IN THE POLITICAL EQUATION; AND THAT DATUK MUSA HITAM AND TENGKU RAZALEIGH HAMZAH REMAIN THE MOST VIABLE "YOUNGER GENERATION" CONTESTANTS FOR THE PREMIRSHIP AT SOME FUTURE DATE. DATUK HUSSEIN ONN'S

STANDING BOTH INSIDE THE PARTY AND OUTSIDE IS PERCEIVED AS STRONG AND BASICALLY UNAFFECTED BY RIVALRIES AMONG HIS SUBORDINATES. THESE IMPRESSIONS GENERALLY SUPPORT THE ASSESSMENT SET FORTH IN REFTEL AND REPAIR. END SUMMARY/INTRODUCTION.

2. UMNO POLITICS. ACCORDING TO EMBOFF'S CONTACTS, THE INTERNECINE STRUGGLE FOR POWER BETWEEN RIVAL UMNO FACTIONS IS SUBSIDING AS THE CONSERVATIVE "OLD GUARD" DRIVE TO EXPEL ALL "COMMUNISTS AND PRO-COMMUNISTS" FROM THE PARTY AND THE GOVERNMENT, AND IN THE PROCESS SETTLE OLD SCORES WITH YOUNGER RIVALS, LOSES MOMENTUM. DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMED HAS EMERGED WITH HIS POSITION STRENGTHENED, HAVING REBUFFED ATTACKS BY THE LATE OLD GUARD SPOKESMAN TAN SRI JAAFAR ALBAR AND HAVING RECEIVED SUPPORT, TACIT OR OTHERWISE, FROM YOUNGER GENERATION UMNO LEADERS TENGKU RAZALEIGH HAMZAH AND DATUK MUSA HITAM. AT THIS JUNCTURE AT APPEARS MAHATHIR WILL NOT FACE A SERIOUS CHALLENGE WHEN HE RUNS FOR THE UMNO DEPUTY PRESIDENT POST IN THE 1978 PARTY ELECTIONS. GHAZALI SHAFIE REMAINS PORTRAYED AS ACTIVELY UTILIZING HIS KEY POSITION AS HOME MINISTER TO PROMOTE HIS OWN CANDIDACY FOR HIGHER OFFICE. WE HAS SUCCEEDED IN IMPROVING HIS IMAGE AMONG THE UMNO RIGHT WING BUT NOT, HIS DETRACTORS CLAIM, SUFFICIENTLY TO ASSURE HIS ELECTION TO ONE OF THE THREE COVETED UMNO VICE PRESIDENT SLOTS IN 1978. ONE UMNO INSIDER BELIEVES MUSA HITAM WILL BE ELECTED UMNO YOUTH CHIEF IN 1978 AND BRING THIS ORGANIZATION CLOSER UNDER THE CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 03 KUALA 00713 01 OF 02 021028Z

WING OF THE PARENT BODY. CHARISMATIC POLITICO DATUK HARUN IDRIS, IDOLIZED BY MANY MALAYS BUT BELEAGUERED BY COURT JUDGEMENTS AGAINST HIM FOR VARIOUS ABUSES OF OFFICE WHILE UMNO YOUTH LEADER AND CHIEF MINISTER OF SELANGOR, REMAINS AN IMPORTANT FIGURE BUT NO LONGER IS PERCEIVED AS A VIABLE CONTENDER FOR TOP LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN UMNO OR THE GOM IN THE NEAR TERM. MEANWHILE PRIME MINISTER DATUK HUSSEON ONN HAS NOT BEEN HURT BY THE RIVALRIES BETWEEN HIS SUBORDINATES AND AMONG THE VARIOUS UMNO INTEREST GROUPS, ALTHOUGH ONE RIGHT WING DETRACTOR ACCUSED HIM OF ACCOMMODATING HIMSELF TO WHICHEVER GROUP PREVAILED AT ANY GIVEN MOMENT.

3. NATIONAL FRONT POLITICS. KELANTAN POLITICS PROVIDES A GRAPHIC EXAMPLE OF UMNO WORKING THROUGH A PLIANT PAS CHIEF MINISTER USING ITS LEVERAGE TO FORCE ITS WILL ON ITS NUMERICALLY SUPERIOR PAS PARTNER AND SETTLE SOME OLD PARTISAN SCORES. SIMILARLY, A DAP POLITICIAN IN KEDAH SUGGESTED THAT ATTEMPTS BY UMNO

TO DOMINANTE ITS COALITION PARTNERS MIGHT CAUSE
SOME OF THEM TO BOLT THE NF PRIOR TO THE NEXT GENERAL
ELECTIONS, CONTENDING THAT THE FIRST TO GO MIGHT BE THE
PENANG-BASED GERAKAN PARTY WHICH UMNO SEEMS TO BE
ATTEMPTING TO ELBOW ASIDE.

4. NEXT GENERAL ELECTIONS. ALTHOUGH ACCORDING TO THE
CONSTITUTION THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTIONS IN MALAYSIA NEED
NOT RPT NOT BE HELD BEFORE 1970 (THE LAST WERE IN AUGUST
1974 AND THE NEXT MUST BE HELD WITHIN FIVE YEARS OF
THAT DATE), THERE HAS BEEN CONSIDERABLE SPECULATION IN
KUALA LUMPUR THAT ELECTIONS MAY BE HELD IN 1978.

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PAGE 01 KUALA 00713 02 OF 02 021016Z
ACTION EA-09

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03
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-----021045Z 019148 /14

R 020313Z FEB 77
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 KUALA LUMPUR 0713

CONTACTS ON THIS TRIP AGREED THAT THERE IS A STRONG
POSSIBILITY ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD IN 1978, ALTHOUGH
THEIR REASONS DIFFERED. THE PREVAILING VIEW
IS THAT 1978 SHOULD BE A PROPITIOUS YEAR ECONOMICALLY,
AS MALAYSIA'S ECONOMIC FORECAST FOR 1977 IS BULLISH AND
THIS IS EXPECTED TO CARRY INTO THE FOLLOWING YEAR.
ADDITIONAL FACTORS INCLUDE THE SUPERSTITIOUS ONE OF
AVOIDING ELECTIONS IN YEAR ENDING WITH "9" SINCE
OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES THESE HAVE BEEN INAUSPICIOUS,
PARTICULARLY 1969 WHEN RACE RIOTS FOLLOWED THE
ELECTIONS (1959 WAS THE YEAR WHEN LIM CHONG EU
BOLTED THE MCA AND THE ALLIANCE). A MINORITY VIEW
CONTENDS NATIONAL ELECTIONS PRIOR TO THE 1978 UMNO PARTY
ELECTIONS WOULD ALSO PROVIDE THE PRIME MINISTER WITH A

NATIONAL MANDATE TO ENABLE HIM TO CONSOLIDATE HIS
POSITION IN UMNO AND RECAST ITS LEADERSHIP ALONG LINES
HE DESIRES. FINALLY, THE DAP POLITICIAN IN KEDAH
OPINED THAT ELECTIONS WOULD HAVE TO BE HELD IN
1978 BECAUSE THE GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO POSTPONE
THEM ANY LONGER IN VIEW OF THE DETERIORATING ECONOMIC
CONDITIONS DAP EXPECTS THE COUNTRY WILL BE FACING BY
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PAGE 02 KUALA 00713 02 OF 02 021016Z

THAT TIME.

5. COMMENT: IN GENERAL,,PERCEPTIONS FROM THE PROVINCES
PARALLEL THOSE HELD IN KUALA LUMPUR, ALTHOUGH THE
DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES TEND TO BRING DEVELOPMENTS INTO
SHARPER FOCUS. WE NOW BELIEVES THAT THE
UMNO CONSERVATIVE ALLIANCE THAT APPEARED ASCENDANT IN OCTOBER
AND NOVEMBER IS UNRAVELING, WEAKENED MOST
RECENTLY BY THE DEATH OF SYED JAAFAR ALBAR WHO UNLIKE
SOME OF HIS POLITICAL BEDFELLOWS WAS FEARLESS IN
PUBLIC ATTACKS ON OPPONENTS AND ALSO BY A RECONCILIATION
BETWEEN HUSSIN AND TUNKU ABDUL RAHMAN. DATUK HARUN'S
READMISSION TO UMNO HAS APPEASED HIS SUPPORTERS.
SIMILARLY, THE ARREST OF SIX POLITICAL FIGURES IN
EARLY NOVEMBER MOLLIFIED OTHER ANTI-COMMUNIST
ELEMENTS. ACCORDING TO ONE SENIOR STATE UMNO
OFFICIAL, DISGRUNTLED OLD TIMERS AROUND THE TUNKU,
PARTICULARLY DATUK SENU ABDUL RAHMAN AND KHIR JOHARI,
MIGHT BE SATISFIED IF ONE OF THEIR NUMBER, PERHAPS
KHIR, IS BROUGHT INTO THE CABINET. THE NET IMPACT
OF THIS EROSION OF THE LINKS OF THE CONSERVATIVE COALITION
WOULD BE TO REDUCE TAN SRI GHAZALI SHAFIE'S HOPES OF
MUSTERING PARTY CONSERVATIVES TO SUPPORT HIS QUEST FOR
HIGHER OFFICE IN UMNO. AS FOR THE PRIME MINISTER, HIS
POSITION SEEMS SECURE AND GENERALLY ACCEPTED, SINCE HIS
WELL KNOWN PREDELICITION FOR SECURITY MATTERS AND
PRAGMATIC MODERNIST AND RACIALLY MODERATE APPROACH TO
GOVERNMENT SEEM TO HAVE INSULATED HIM FROM ATTACKS BY RIVAL
FACTIONS. THE MAJOR QUESTION MARK REGARDS HIS SUCCESSOR.
A CONSENSUS OF PROVINCIAL POLITICIANS AND JOURNALISTS IS
THAT DR. MAHATHIR IS IN A COMMANDING POSITION TO RECEIVE
THE UMNO ENDORSEMENT IN 1978 AS DEPUTY PARTY PRESIDENT,
A FURTHER GUARANTEE THAT THE PM WILL ASSUME THE
PREMIERSHIP SHOULD THE INCUMBENT RESIGN OR BE INCAPACITATED.
TWO DARK HOURSE CANDIDATES ARE THE ARROGANTLY AMBITIOUS
GHAZALI AND FORMER AGRICULTURE MINISTER GHAFAR BABA, THE
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PAGE 03 KUALA 00713 02 OF 02 021016Z

LATTER A PARTY LOYALIST PASSED OVER WHEN DATUK HUSSEIN
SELECTED DR. MAHATHIR AS DPM AND WHO SOME BELIEVE
MIGHT WANT TO MOVE UP A NOTCH FROM HIS CURRENT
UMNO VICE PRESIDENT POST. MEANWHILE THE TWO
MOST PROMINENT YOUNGER CONTENDERS FOR FUTURE TOP
LEADERSHIP IN THE PARTY AND GOVERNMENT, DATUK MUSA
HITAM AND TENGKU RAZALEIGH HAMZAH, ARE LYING LOW
WHILE ATTEMPTING TO STRENGTHEN (OR IN RAZALEIGH'S
CASE REBUILD) THEIR RESPECTIVE POWER BASES.
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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
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Concepts: POLITICAL STABILITY, ELECTIONS, POLITICAL PARTIES
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Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977KUALA00713
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770036-1238
Format: TEL
From: KUALA LUMPUR
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
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Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770282/aaaacudw.tel
Line Count: 235
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
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Office: ACTION EA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 5
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 04-Jan-2005 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3433051
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: UMNO, NATIONAL FRONT POLITICS AND ELECTIONS: SOME NORTH MALAYSIAN PERSPECTIVES A. KUALA LUMPUR 549, B. KUALA LUMPUR A-10, 1/25/77
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, MY, UMNO
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/df6e6dcd-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009